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ABSTRACT

Recently, state government and concerned educational agencies in California have shown much interest in adopting a more "rigorous" curriculum for all students, longer school days, and stricter high school graduation and college entrance requirements. These proposed measures are not wrong in themselves, but as standards required for every student they do not stand up to careful analysis. The proposed reinstatement of university requirements (such as 2 years of algebra and a foreign language) pays no attention to the proven uselessness of these courses to most students, and overlooks the ineffective ways in which these subjects are conventionally taught. Furthermore, the "required of all" provision of the reforms neglects the cultural and language barriers which affect minority ethnic students (by 1990, over 50 percent of California's population will be comprised of minority ethnic groups). Similarly, unconventional students who may have discipline or learning problems will not be reached by the proposed reforms. The supporters of reform have overlooked studies showing that the high school courses a student takes rarely can be related to success in college and later life. Because the same standards, requirements, and courses at school cannot be justified, the dilemma of what to require can be resolved only by giving students more choices. A variety of curricular routes to college may be devised with students' involvement. Such an open scheme would be more in keeping with research findings, would better address future needs of society, and would be more responsive to the growing diversity within communities. (KH)

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ALTERNATIVE GRADUATION AND ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS:

A HUMAN ESSENTIAL

BY

Don Glines

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ALTERNATIVE GRADUATION AND ENTRANCE REQUIREMENTS: A HUMAN ESSENTIAL

Don Glines

High school graduation and college entrance requirements are once again a center of controversy in the United States. Reform is being advocated, this time toward what is hailed as a return to academic rigor. Somehow the notion has returned that by mandating more algebra, English, foreign language, and science, education and thus communities, corporations, and the United States as a whole, will be better.

The fallacy of such thinking has long been in evidence. Such approaches have been tried before without success. Systems that have worked well for many youth are being ignored and/or condemned as lacking quality and standards. The bandwagon effect has again taken hold; the domino syndrome is in operation. The ills of society and education are going to be corrected by requiring more of what has only been of some success for the select few. The controversy in California is illustrative of the national pattern.

When the new University of California and State University and Colleges entrance requirements, the model high school curriculum being considered by the State Board of Education, the proposed educational reforms advocated by the State Department of Education, the counter proposal by the Association of School Administrators, and the major bill by the Senate Education Committee chairman are analyzed carefully, it is not hard

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to understand why they are all wrong, when applied universally. The key word is ALL. If society as a whole understands the needs of some students, parents and teachers, if it is concerned about each person as an individual, and if the California process is open-minded in reviewing the research and the experiences of pioneer educators, it is unlikely that after considerable deliberation, such standards will be adopted for ALL.

It would be quite appropriate if the criteria for admission and graduation being suggested were seen as only one avenue, or one option, for those who voluntarily selected the path, even if at this moment in history the large majority opted for such mandates. However, as standards required for ALL, they can never stand the test of careful analysis. The only way they could survive is as Alternative One. The schools and colleges should also offer Alternatives Two, Three and Four at a minimum, and preferably several more. Students should be able to select the graduation and entrance patterns and criteria that best match their individual learning and living styles, facilitated by an instructor using an approach most suited to his or her pedagogical preferences.

Therefore, support for the conventional proposals and requirements now in existence, or for those being suggested is to be encouraged, but only if there is maximum leeway for students to succeed, graduate, enter college and adulthood through other alternatives.

The university system has proposed four years of English, three years of math, including algebra I and II and geometry, one year of science, two years of foreign language, one year of United States history (but nothing about the potential future histories) and one year of fine arts. The State University and College system proposal is similar except that only two years of math are required. The question is why? What significant difference will such combinations produce?

The State Board of Education has discussed a model for high school graduation for ALL students. It includes four years of English, two years ~~of~~ a single foreign language, three years of math (including two years of algebra and one of geometry), two years of science (including physical-earth science and biology), three years of social sciences (including one of world culture, one of U. S. history), and a semester each of U. S. government and economics, a year of visual and performing arts, and a semester of computer literacy. The question in why? There is not one shred of substantive research to support such requirements for ALL students. What research there is (most of it on both sides is inconclusive) supports the argument against such patterns.

The State Department of Education is expending efforts to increase the length of the school day and year for all students, to require English, social studies, math, science and fine arts combinations similar to the proposals cited above, to push for more homework and textbooks, and to insist on rigorous

academic programs and discipline. All of this is tantamount to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic.

The California Association for School Administrators has, unfortunately, with only minimal debate, supported much of this effort. The Representative Assembly adopted patterns similar to the above proposals. They recommended a Basic Academic Core, and an Extended Academic Core. The former includes little new, other than focusing on competencies as well as courses. The latter echoes the State Board and even suggests Latin, but not Arabic. More of the same in a different package is not necessarily the answer. However, the majority decided that these are the acceptable educational patterns being demanded by the public (singular) and that many members of the Legislature will financially support them, as a result of hearing often from a loud minority in their home community (singular) and voting district (again singular). The California School Boards Association members were divided but they, too, finally decided to support the proposals for more rigid mandates of academic courses.

The chairperson of the Senate Education Committee presented a modified version of the State Board package. A little less rigorous, the proposal called for three years of English, three years of social studies, two years of math, two years of science, one year of fine arts and one year of computer literacy--or a demonstration of computer competence. The package was tied to school finance and reform in teacher tenure

laws. Other more or less flexible options began to emerge from other legislators.

It does not matter whether these requirements are for California in 1984, for some other state now, or for the future. The requirements still need to be opposed by futures oriented curriculum developers and community leaders.

The reasons to oppose such proposals for ALL students are legion. There are many research studies and a number of books clearly providing the justification for opposition. The reason for supporting such proposals, if they are implemented as one option, one alternative, one set of criteria among several established for graduation and admission, is simple; it is the American way. The United States gains its strength from its diversity, from its pluralistic society, from providing choices for multiple learning opportunities, individualized curriculum and personalized approaches. The strength of the nation is sapped by uniformity, by conformity, by standardized mandates, except where health and safety are involved.

There are very few things that everyone has to do or must learn. Most relate to health and safety. There are many things that are desirable to know or to be able to do. Perhaps there are some things that a number of people should know. However, there are other things that only a minority need to consider. Finally, there are items that only a few really need to know, be able to do or even find desirable.

Examples of the flaws in creating the same standards for ALL are well-documented. A summary of a few indicates that the

opposition is based upon years of research, experience, philosophy, opinion and experimentation.

The born again university requirements have been in place for decades. They did not make sense before and they do not make sense now. Cries of unprepared students have filled the media for many years--even in the heyday of traditional education. It has been known for a long time that two years of a foreign language, studied fifty minutes a day with homework, for two nine-month periods, only produces illiterates. If fluency in a foreign language is desirable (and thus required) and opportunities to be immersed in the language and culture are provided even in conventional schools, then the requirements of a foreign language might make sense. As it is, the two years are a waste of time for most students; they prove nothing in terms of academic ability for many college majors.

Algebra is an obsolete course, especially the way it is taught in conventional schools, and so is geometry, in this electronics revolution era. However, if algebra is to be required, why for one year? The math gifted students can learn it in six weeks. Give them some materials and get out of their way. Others can handle algebra if studied for fifty weeks. The thirty-six week year is inappropriate for most students. Many need less time, others need more. Why are the proposals calling for one year of algebra, one of geometry, and one of algebra II, when these courses have practically no value for many students. They do not train the mind, they do not assist nonmath oriented people in later life and they do not

contribute to being a successful parent and a beautiful human. Why not require Latin? It makes just as much sense.

Another year of English does not automatically improve the ability of students. Many can write well at the college level by grade nine. For those who cannot write well, then help them write. Thirty-six weeks more of Silas Marner and Julius Caesar is not going to make a difference. If the students received a D in 7th grade math, the student will not be able to do 8th grade math. Usually it is a similar course, only the textbook is a different color. If the student does poorly in 11th grade English, another year of more of the same generally does not lead to significant improvement. If the student already does exceptionally well in English in the 11th grade, there is no need to require more.

Homework follows the same pattern. Those students who understand the material do not need to do more of it at home. Those who do not understand it in school, should not do it at home. They become frustrated, they meet failure, the family may be upset, the work is not done or is copied from someone else. Such lack of success and boredom are key factors in alienating youth from school.

By the end of the eighties, over 50% of the school population of California will be comprised of minority ethnic groups. These students can and should learn as well as those from Anglo homes. However, there are cultural and language factors which make required of all an ill-conceived banner. It has been illustrated over and over again that it is the

affective domain, not the cognitive, that is the base of school success. More math is not the answer. Quantity does not replace quality and relevancy.

Currently, some students of all ethnic groups are classified as gifted and talented and do well in school. They are generally bored with their classes but they succeed well by conventional standards. Others are of the same ability but have given up fighting a system that does not provide the opportunities essential for their development--the extreme right brain arts oriented student in an extreme left brain academic school.

There are students who are in-school dropouts; they get C's, a few B's and D's, they stay in school but they are not excited. Then there is a group of discipline-problem students, by traditional standards--the turned off, antisocial, seemingly always-in-trouble-individuals. Finally, there are the less capable students--great youth, but just not too sharp in academics called French and chemistry--not to mention the other group of youngsters still negatively labeled "special education." Will ALL these six groups automatically benefit from more math, more homework, more English taught in the same conventional school structure with textbooks, 30 desks facing the blackboard, 50-minute periods, report cards, and more and tougher tests?

The Eight-Year Study of the 1930s (Adventure in American Education Series, 1942), which has been conveniently overlooked by the various fractions shouting that they have the

answers--that all students need to meet the same minimum standards--was a landmark curriculum review. The results were coded into five volumes of data from 30 of the best high schools and 300 of the best colleges. Staffed by excellent researchers, the study verified that it does not make any difference what courses students take in high school related to success in college and success in life. In fact, the students who deviated the furthest from the conventional norm proved to be the most successful in the follow-up studies.

These results were supported by the Ohio State Laboratory School during the eight-year study. Two books about the students, We Were Guinea Pigs, and Guinea Pigs: Twenty Years Later (Willis, 1961) showed that the graduates of this "crazy" program were significantly more successful, when evaluated by conventional criteria, than were their peers in the traditional schools.

In the seventies the Wilson Campus School of Mankato State University, Minnesota, confirmed the Eight-Year Study (Glines, 1980). Students from K-12 were mixed together with no attendance requirements, no courses, no traditional schedules, no report cards or homework, or no graduation requirements; they had the option of taking all the experiences they desired, in whatever fields, learned in a personalized, individualized setting, with other students and adults they selected. This truly innovative, highly successful program for youth was described in several national journals as the most successful experimental school of its time in America.

Why have not the proponents of academic rigor, and mandated-for-all-standards, tried to understand the lessons from the Eight-Year Study, from Ohio State, from Mankato? The Wilson students were graduated when they were ready, without grades, class rank, Carnegie units, credits and courses (such as four years of English, three years of math, et al.). Yet they learned, they behaved, they got jobs, they performed volunteer social service, they got married--and those who chose entered the best universities in America--without all the traditional badges of courage.

Mankato State even had undergraduate and graduate university programs that operated in a fashion similar to Wilson. Yes, at the college level, too, students were successful in learning and succeeding, at traditional honors levels, through nontraditional modes and requirements.

If there are to be specific mandates, then why not require home economics? Departmentalization should be eliminated in schools, but if departments are retained, home economics may be the most important. Not traditional cooking and sewing but child growth and development, nutrition, health, safety, interpersonal relations--the really important basics in life. Since when is child growth and development nonacademic or nonrigorous?

Yet home economics is not mentioned. Neither is industrial arts, business, physical education or other important fields. Drama, art, and music are only given lip service--one year of fine arts. What research is there to

support the notion that three years of math, especially algebra, is more important than three years of fine arts for ALL students--for high school graduation--for life pursuits--for college success? Since when is a course in economics more important than futures studies? Again, a topic not even mentioned.

The emphasis on reading and math in the first grade for ALL is just as erroneous as four years of English for ALL at the secondary level. Students soon develop trouble in school as a result of underdeveloped maturity and motivation factors, yet ALL students are supposed to have a basal reader. Why? Many students should NOT be reading in first grade and many students should NOT have math in the 7th grade.

The world appears to have already moved into the beginning stages of the greatest transformation in the history of humankind. The Twenty-First Century may be dramatically different. It could be doom and gloom or a golden age, depending upon the decisions being made now. Schools should become extinct in not too many decades. Electronics, compassion, changing lifestyles, human values, global dilemmas, and new technologies will force a new learning system for a New Age. Education is already moving into a transition--from schooling to learning. The old requirements, standards, methods, courses, patterns, and structures of the Industrial Age are no longer appropriate for the coming years.

Therefore, the same standards, requirements or courses at the elementary, secondary, and university levels are no longer

justified. There must be choices. People can become beautiful, well-educated humans without algebra or without an extra year of English. Some learn and mature better through fine arts or health oriented experience, each of which can be of high academic quality.

The present solution to the dilemma of what to require is to provide a minimum of four criteria approaches for graduating from high school and entering college. These are all equal in stature and standards in preparing youth for university, work, or other life pursuits.

Option 1: A student may take four years of English, three of math, two of foreign language, two of science, three of social studies, and one of fine arts, along with similar electives. When completed, he or she graduates and is eligible for the universities or the world of work.

Option 2: A student may take some of the above courses but may prefer to substitute some art and music for algebra, or a different format in math. The student can show proficiency in English in less than four years and can count home economics. When completed, he or she is also graduated and is eligible for the universities or work.

Option 3: A student may design his or her own learning experience with no specific requirements or report cards. The students spend a great deal of time in the community. They present a portfolio to the university or to the employer. They too are prepared for college and adulthood.

Option 4: Those students and parents not satisfied with the other three options can create their own pattern of experiences through negotiation with their high school graduation review committee. They negotiate with the university for entrance and with the employer for work. They demonstrate that they have achieved and are prepared for work, life and/or college. They have done it through a route that may be popular with only a small percentage, but that route is highly significant for the present and future life of the youth involved.

Such approaches have been piloted. They do not cost any more money, can be voluntary and do not need to break State laws. They conform to a win/win philosophy of Options for All (in order for me to win, you must win), rather than win/lose (in order for me to win, you must lose) spirit which mandates that, for example, ALL students will attend school from September to June.

The adoption of single standard graduation and admission requirements in California would move learning backward. Optional, alternative choices for graduation and admission would move it forward. The nontraditional forms need not be less rigorous, of less quality or of inferior standards. They can be evaluated and can be even tougher than the traditional. They do provide for different family and study styles.

Of the four graduation/entrance options offered, it would be fine if 45% chose Option 1, 35% chose Option 2, 15% chose Option 3 and only 5% chose Option 4. At this moment of

societal and educational transformation, those percentages are acceptable. By 2004 the figures may be reversed.

The diversity of humans in a community, many of whom have common goals but multiple ways of reaching them, clarions the call for more alternative schools, programs and colleges in the eighties. The original philosophy of options was that of a variety of well-accepted choices for ALL. There was no such concept as a regular school or university with an alternative to the regular if the student did not fit. The plans provided for several programs in a district, each enrolling a share of the student. All of the choices were equally praised, equally supported, equally funded, and equally publicized. The approach a student chose was his or her regular school. The design has worked beautifully in the few communities that understood the philosophy and correctly implemented the mechanics.

Each program ~~was~~ established to include students traditionally awarded A through F, all ethnic groups--a true cross-section of the community--with involvement in interschool sports, governments, bands, if desired, and all with proper facilities. They were designed for all levels: elementary, middle, secondary and university. They could be separate schools, schools-within-schools, colleges within universities, community learning centers, or the other 20 possibilities. The world was the classroom for those who chose it.

Alternatives, or a choice such as #4, were not seen to be for dropouts, problem students, less capable students, unwed

mothers, racial segregation, or something to try when the regular program failed. All options were highly publicized and clearly explained. The student was not put in a program which did not fit. There was no intent to provide a lesser curriculum or to skip basic human skills, knowledges, and values. Rather, they were to be expanded, learned in a different environment, with more flexibility as to mandates, with more concern for mandates, and with more concern for motivation and maturation.

The current effort to return to basics has done its best to eliminate alternative choices, for the sponsors of the traditional modes think they know best for ALL students. They have succeeded in reaching the majority vote level; though they give lip service, and allow small alternatives, such as continuation schools, independent study, and pregnant minor programs. They have managed to hold the enrollments in such alternatives to only one percent of the California youth (Alternative School and Program Survey, 1982).

A variety of opinions, surveys, articles, straw polls, studies (Jennings and Nathan, 1972) indicate that probably 85% of the students would benefit from other than the present grade level curriculum mandates. There are parents who are professional educators. They have read the research, have read about or participated in the experiments of the 30's and 60's, and have concern about the future preservation of the biosphere and humankind. They want their children to read, but when they are ready, and often through different approaches. They are

good citizens, are taxpayers and they may be in the minority. Do they have to submit to the course requirements desired by others who have similar interests and backgrounds but who believe in mandating the same conventional courses for everyone?

There is no longer a singular public, or community, or district. There are plural publics, communities, districts. The communities are split in their opinion, 30-40-30. A longer school day/year does not help ALL. The four-day week schools have removed that myth (Office of Rural Education, 1981). It is now time to defuse the graduation and admission myths.

The future is there to create. It is time to heed the advice of Willie Wonka, who so clearly said: "It is time to make dreams out of realities and realities out of dreams; it is time to be dreamers of the dreams." It is time for educators to consider more human options in the fumbling process of graduation and admission. It is time to realize that society is about to enter the Twenty-First Century.

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